

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #37 - May 1999

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Story Bytes

Very Short Stories
Lengths a Power of 2

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**Story Bytes better
than sound bites.**

The Conflict Between Sides *or* Like a Broken Record

M. Stanley Bubien

SIDE A: I will avenge thee, father (skip).
I will avenge thee, father (skip).
I will avenge thee, father (skip).
I will avenge thee, father...

(Thirty to fifty years later, flip record.)

SIDE B: I will avenge thee, father (skip).
I will avenge thee, father (skip).
I will avenge thee, father (skip).
I will avenge thee, father...

(Thirty to fifty years later, flip record...) [64]

Abortion Kiss

J.R. Clubb

I was wearing a T-shirt of a fetus in a womb. In shiny blue letters it said, "BE MY BABY." She rubbed my belly and I pushed out my tummy to pretend the baby kicked. She thought that was cute. We both had on our bare feet and the grass was yellow because it hadn't rained for weeks. She had a little cut on her chin and when we kissed, it started to bleed. Blood dripped on my shirt and covered the baby's nose and mouth. She called it an abortion kiss. I never washed the shirt again. She moved in ungainly bounds towards her freedom of action. She inhaled the oppressive stillness of air and exhaled ocean mist. Our sideways ship drifted leeward of the desired course. [128]

Could You Die With That?

M. Stanley Bubien

He had shot me and left me for dead, and dead I would presently be—but not just yet. The blast from his revolver had certainly rendered me unconscious, but I came to, gun fully in hand, and loaded still—not even one shot fired. I knew this, from memory certainly, but also because I clicked through the whole cartridge, weighing each bullet between fingertips as I methodically removed them to make doubly sure.

I found him resting against the bar, sucking down whiskey, and I approached from behind, locking the hammer back, pressing the barrel into the exposed portion of his neck.

“I thought you’s dead,” he told me, apologizing, I believe, for my catching him unawares.

“Not yet,” I answered, “but soon enough.” Forced to uncover the wound were his bullet pierced my side, I relieved him of his six-shooters, and dropped them, kicking them in bloody streaks across the floor. Replacing my hand in a vain attempt to staunch the flow, I felt the warmth of my crimson life ebbing upon it.

“Soon enough,” I repeated, pressing the barrel unsteadily. “But first, you.”

He chuckled only briefly, for the motion jostled my gun, and he knew my finger rested squarely upon a hair trigger.

“Them’s the price you’s payin’ for mistakes,” he told me. “I reckon.”

“I reckon,” and my vision blurred slightly, but I blinked it clear.

“And I’m reckonin’ I’s gotta live with that.” He paused, and though he remained stiff in the neck, I knew he focused his eyes as much toward me as a man in his situation could. “But I’s wonderin’ ...”

“Careful,” I commanded with a jab.

“I’s wonderin’, can you?”

“Can I what?”

He indicated my pistol. “Could you live with that?”

“That’s the wrong question.” And, already having weighed the ramifications of its converse, I grinned fully—would have laughed even, save for the

fact that it would most surely have rendered me unconscious. “You see, I don’t have to.” I removed my hand, offered it for his examination, drenched to the bone with blood.

He nodded carefully, for I had presented him, in that hand, with a basic truth, which he recognized as such. “Then I’m reckonin’ we’ll be seein’ each’un the other in, awe, well, hell.”

I shook my head and lost my grin, for had I not been completely convinced ahead of time that he would speak those very words, I probably would have fallen dead to the floor at that very moment—but I still had life left in me yet.

I pulled the trigger.

The hammer clicked, causing him to go stiff, though what it struck was only an empty cartridge.

“Maybe not,” I replied, lowering my gun, and with vision blurring again, I strode away. My back was to him, but I heard his move, could gauge every step as though I watched through clear eyes. When he dove for his six-shooters, however, it was already too late.

I collapsed upon the floor, empty gun in hand, and died before he could fire a single shot. [512]

Cannibal Dreams

Lisa E. Cote

At first we were just roommates. He answered the ad I placed in the paper, along with several others, and I chose him, as I might have chosen a dress for a funeral: plain, unremarkable, conservative, neat; he seemed to be all those things. He worked as a banker, didn't smoke or drink excessively, and, unlike the other male applicants, didn't come on to me when I showed him the spare bedroom. Yet when we became friends I discovered he was many things I hadn't expected. For one thing, he could cook.

"Amanda," he said to me one night as we ate canned spaghetti together and watched TV, "have you ever eaten frog?"

I looked at him suspiciously and after a short silence said, "No."

"Would you like to?"

Another pause, after which I responded, "I don't know." It seemed a rather forward thing to ask, a strange and presumptuous question. Or maybe he was joking.

He wasn't.

"There's a guy at the market who sells frog's legs," he went on, "and I bought some from him this morning. Would you like to try some? I'd love to share them with you."

"Well... OK, sure. I'll try some."

At the time I barely knew him well enough to remove his underwear load from the dryer; so it was strange to consider sharing delicacies with him. But there was something so sincere in his face and his voice, so innocent and inviting in his, "I'd love to share them with you."

When it came time to actually eat though, I was worried for a moment that I wouldn't be able to after all, that I would insult him, and worse, that I would reveal to him a weakness, a fear. But as I watched him savor every mouthful, chewing slowly with mute rapture, I couldn't resist, and took a tiny bite. It tasted like tender chicken thighs, cooked to perfection and basted in herbed butter sauce.

I groaned my approval without thinking, and he smiled at me, saying nothing and everything at once.

After that night exotic dining became a weekend routine for us: sweetmeats, rabbit stew, Cornish hen, ostrich, buffalo steak, calamari, sea urchin, shark. Then there was the vegetable and fruit kingdom Jerusalem artichoke, kohlrabi, blood oranges, plantain, guava, pomegranates. We devoured it all, and I grew more happy and fearless with every new discovery. I also learned a lot about him from his culinary crusades: “Tonight’s sushi night,” he would say, “because it reminds me of my stint as a DJ in Hong Kong,” or “Try this Jambalaya. I got the recipe from my landlady in New Orleans. She taught me voodoo hexes too.” Once, in the forest, as we picked wild mushrooms to eat with our asparagus, he pointed to a patch of dainty little flesh-colored fungi with round caps. “Those are magic mushrooms,” he explained, “I tried them once—it was an experience.”

Here was a guy who ironed his tee shirts and wore a tie to work, and he had partied at Mardi Gras and eaten magic mushrooms: maybe on the same night! I was intensely jealous of him then, and, of course, in love.

We continued to spend time together since he hadn’t made many friends yet, and since I had let my other friendships slide. One of the friends I still talked to on the phone was always at me about him, asking what was going on, if it was going anywhere, and gee he wasn’t that good-looking but what was he like in bed anyway? Of course I didn’t have a clue, but I was convinced I already had the insight to say, “phenomenal.” I told her that he would try anything, was open to everything. It was true. He watched “B” movies on late-night television one night, and showed me how to taste wine the next. He had a tattoo of a skull on his shoulder and a bird-watcher’s poster on his closet door. More than that, however, he was entirely at ease with all his private contradictions, those of the world at large, and my own.

Soon I began to obsess about him leaving. Not that he had said anything about moving out or moving away; but I knew it was inevitable that he desert me, just because there were still places he hadn’t been. And one of those places, I reminded myself, was my bed. I would not let him go without, as he would say, sharing it with him. So I waited for an opportune weekend, bought an extra bottle of wine for our supper, dabbed on some exotic perfume. Sandalwood.

“Amanda,” he said to me after it was over, “I should tell you I’m already attached.”

There was a picture of a pretty woman in a military uniform in his room.

I had hoped it was his sister or his cousin, but had never asked, just in case.

“That’s fine,” I said.

He had an admirable physique, as I’d guessed, but the sex had been commonplace, almost nondescript. I wondered if he’d made it that way on purpose.

That night, after he returned to his room, I dreamed I was having dinner alone. The meat was choice, delectable, tender and rich, with the flavor of wild game. I knew in the dream that I had cooked it, that I had even hunted the beast myself in the forest, but I could not remember what it was. Venison? Rabbit? Pheasant? I couldn’t say. But I knew the sauce was made from magic mushrooms. I thought I must be in India, because of the Sandalwood trees, and I wondered if eating this flesh was therefore sacrilege. I thought that even if it was it was the finest meal I’d ever had. Only when I woke did I realize I’d been feasting on him.

He moved away not long after, to be with the woman in the picture, and didn’t leave me a forwarding address.

As for eating frog, I’ve recently learned that some species of them are cannibals, and I haven’t been able to touch them since. [1024]

It Never Bloomed for Babcia

M. Stanley Bubien

“It never bloomed for Babcia,” my wife sniffed at the fledgling tree, barely four feet tall, but stock full of oranges.

“We replanted it,” I told her, a promise keeping me from the true consolation I wanted to offer.

“This pot’s only a foot bigger,” she grumbled. “It’s not fair.”

I sighed. My wife had given the orange tree to her grandmother, original pot and all, just a year before the elderly woman died. I initially thought the idea crazy. Personally, I considered myself an expert on orange trees, having grown up around them all my life—seems like everyone in this part of Southern California owns a grove—but I had never seen one in a pot! And I told Kay as much. She, however, was relentless.

“Here Babcia,” Kay said, arms outstretched toward the potted tree as her grandmother pushed open her apartment’s screen door. “I knew you wanted something to liven up your porch.”

“Ooohhhh,” Babcia said in a long exclamation, bringing her hands together before her mouth. “It’s wonderful!”

Kay beamed. “Where do you want it Babcia?”

They both looked around, and I found myself ignored for the fifteen minutes it took for them to choose a spot.

“How about here?” Kay would suggest.

“I don’t know, seems like maybe too much sun,” Babcia would answer. “Over there looks just a little better.”

“That’d block your window, Babcia, and you know how you like to see outside.”

Eventually, I found myself dragging the pot to its agreed upon position.

In the months that followed, we caught Babcia pouring water upon it on more than one occasion. “No oranges yet,” she’d always say, brushing the leaves hopefully with gloved fingers.

But it was a particular early-evening visit that I wandered over to the planter as Kay pulled upon the screen. Though shrouded in shade, I spotted a bulbous protrusion in the tree and bent to examine it more closely. “Kay,” I

said as she was about to knock. “Look!”

Eyes wide, she stepped beside me. “Wow,” she breathed. Carefully, reaching amongst the leaves, she touched the rind of the maturing orange. But it hung so loosely from its branch, the poor thing broke off, bounced from her hand and dropped onto the ground.

“No!” Kay screeched and covered her cheeks with her palms.

I picked up the orange before it rolled away. “It would’ve fallen off by itself. The tree’s still too young.”

My wife remained frozen, staring at the piece of fruit as if it were bleeding to death.

“Come on, let’s give it to Babcia.”

With a share of trepidation, I knocked and lead the way within. “Here Babcia,” I presented the orange. “We found this outside.”

“Oh,” Babcia said, shuffling over.

“I did it!” Kay blurted and began to cry. “I knocked it out of the tree! I’m sorry Babcia, I didn’t mean to.”

“Dear, dear,” Babcia reached for her granddaughter. “I saw that orange there,” she explained, brushing Kay’s hair from within their embrace. “I didn’t show you because it was so small and frail, I knew it wouldn’t last. Don’t feel bad, dear, it was just too early.”

They hugged again, and Kay sniffed and wiped at the tears under her glasses. “You’re just saying that.”

“Oh, no,” Babcia replied.

They released, and Kay removed the frames from her face. “I have to clean my mascara. I’ll be right back.” But before she departed, she paused, attempted a smile at her grandmother and said, “thanks, Babcia.” Another tear formed as she headed for the bathroom.

We watched her walk down the hallway. “Poor dear,” Babcia said.

“Yeah. She really wants that tree to bloom for you.”

Babcia remained briefly quiet. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Of course.”

She turned toward me and placed her hands in her apron pocket. “You must promise never to tell Kay.”

I blinked, but nodded.

My initial reaction was to frown toward the unripe orange now resting upon the coffee-table. It looked sad, misshapen from its fall, but the secret

Babcia whispered somehow shed a completely different light upon it. Unexpectedly, I began chuckling. A smile formed on Babcia's lips, and she followed suit until we were both laughing and slapping our legs.

"What?" Kay said reentering the room.

"Um, inside joke," I answered. "Too hard to explain."

That was over a year ago, and that was the only orange Babcia was ever to see from her little tree.

"Why couldn't it bloom like this for her?" Kay asked. "She took better care of it than us."

"They take a long time..." but my voice trailed off as I saw the tears streaking down Kay's cheeks. I reached over and brought her into my arms. I held her tightly, allowing her to cry and repeat again and again her remorse at the tree's lack of fruit for her grandmother.

I wanted to wipe her tears, but as I tried to let go, she hung on. I waited a bit, tried again, but received the same reaction. Closing my eyes, I whispered, "forgive me Babcia."

"Kay," I said. "Listen." She clung, and I repeated myself, a bit more firmly, "listen to me. I know why it never bloomed for Babcia."

She sniffed and, though hesitant, leaned to one side and allowed me look into her face. Rubbing her back, I said, "Babcia was allergic to oranges."

"What?" Kay stepped back and removed her glasses.

"She couldn't eat oranges. They'd get her sick."

"No."

"It's true, I swear. She made me promise to keep it a secret."

"But... but why?" She looked at the tree. "It wouldn't have hurt my feelings."

"Yes," I brushed her cheek with a knuckle, "it would have. But that's not the reason she never told you. She really did love the tree! It was your special gift to her. That's why she always watered it."

The words sunk in slowly, and Kay began crying again. She fell against me, glasses dangling from her fingers. Yet, after a time, I eventually felt a loosening in her sobs, and she began to quiet, consoled, finally, by my embrace. [1024]

Uncle Basil

Joseph Lerner

“I bet you never saw so much money before,” said Uncle Basil. He flipped open his wallet, fanning the bills—50- and 100-dollars. He beamed like an overconfident, would-be card shark.

“Yes, I have,” I replied. “I got a roll just like it in my bedroom top drawer.”

I was fourteen, and I refused to be impressed by his display of sudden and questionable wealth. My uncle sighed, wringing his suspenders. He then leaned against my parents’ bedboard; his shoes dangled over the edge of the bed. The wallet now lay on the night stand, sprawled open.

I thought he might call me a smart-ass or pretend to take a swing at me. I began to leave the bedroom when he yelled, “Nathan!”

“Yes?” I stood in the doorway. I could hear my mother and father downstairs. The doorbell had just rung, which meant that more relatives had arrived. The family was meeting my older brother and his new fiancée at a nearby restaurant.

“You want to come in my car?” Uncle Basil asked.

“Why?”

“I want to stop somewhere, show you something. It’s at your Aunt Dina’s.”

I rolled my eyes. He had just separated from his third wife; they hadn’t even been together long enough for me to call her auntie. “A surprise present for your brother.” He rose and pocketed his wallet. “We’ll go out the back door.” He winked. “So your parents won’t see us.”

I followed him outside because I felt sorry for Basil. I also enjoyed conspiring with him against my parents. I saw that he had parked in the alley as if anticipating a quick get-away.

Sure enough, my mother leaned out the kitchen window. (I could see Uncle Cyrus and Aunt Netty sitting at the table, still in their coats and hats.)

“Basil, where are you going with my son?” she yelled.

“We’ll meet you at the restaurant. We’re getting a present for Gary.”

We both walked faster.

“What present?”

We reached Basil’s beat-up Chevy. He revved the engine. The clutch ground as he shifted. Out the sideview mirror I watched my parents, aunt and uncle hurrying to the back porch.

We were halfway across town before I realized I didn’t know where we were going. Eventually we reached a neighborhood unfamiliar to me. The houses were clapboard and dilapidated and set back on small brown lots. Clumps of gray snow stood like bizarre lawn ornaments beside the driveways. Through the tops of the stick-figure trees I could see the nearby dog racetrack.

He stopped the car but kept the engine running. The heater hardly worked and I was wearing just my sweater. My teeth rattled and my whole body shook. Basil offered me a cigarette, which he lit from the dashboard lighter.

“You been to the dog races?” he asked.

I dragged on the cigarette. “Only the horses, a couple times with Gary.”

“That’s okay, but it’s not the same as greyhounds.” He took back my cigarette. As he smoked he stared at the house before us. Then he stepped out of the car. I followed.

The living room curtains were suddenly wrung back. Glaring at us wasn’t Dina but a stranger. He wore a pinstripe suit and a monogrammed white shirt. Basil rang the doorbell—long, short, like a Morse Code. Dina opened the door.

“What is it, Basil?” Her face was red. Then, “Hello, Nathan.”

“You look—fetching, Nettie,” Basil said. She wore gloves and a bright flowered dress. She was much younger than Basil, thin and pretty with red hair.

She said, “we’re going out.”

“And who’s the gentleman?”

“I said we’re going out.”

“You know why I’m here.”

Dina said, “she’s in the backyard.”

“You keep her outside?”

Basil brushed past her, hurrying to the back door. I followed. The backyard was fenced in. There was a rusting swing, the remnants of a garden, and a doghouse. A chain lay curled in the brown grass fastened to a metal pole. It snaked toward the doghouse.

“Come on, girl,” my uncle said, crouching. Basil grabbed the animal

and cradled it in his arms when it emerged—a small greyhound, shivering from the cold. The dog, squirming, licked his face.

“A puppy?” I asked.

“A whippet. They’re raced too. Her name’s Ginny. They were gonna put her to sleep. She’s only six years old.”

So this was Gary’s present! I thought of my uncle’s other presents to me and Gary over the years. A plastic hula dancer whose skirt lifted as she gyrated, a model train with a burnt-out engine salvaged from a garage sale, an especially dangerous chemistry set that had been pulled from the retail shelves. Basil was a failed visionary, a master of the inappropriate, but today he outdid himself. A live animal!

We returned to the house. Dina and her friend were waiting in the living room. Basil said, “how long has she been outside?”

“A dog doesn’t belong in the house,” the man said.

Basil handed me Ginny. She was still shivering. “Now I remember where I’ve seen you. At the racetrack, with Tommy Ventura.”

The man smiled. “Yeah. What of it?”

Basil balled up his fist. He reared back and swung, punching the man in the face. The man recoiled, then stared in disbelief at his bleeding nose. He groped for his monogrammed handkerchief.

“God damn you, Basil!” Dina screamed.

We left the house, hurrying to the car. Ginny yelped, her paws scratching at my neck and shoulders. I didn’t want to let her go, fearing she might jump out of the car, but I couldn’t hold her and close the window at the same time.

We drove away. The sky had begun to darken, and the buildings were haloed in the streetlights. We hadn’t reached downtown yet, but the streets were already choked with traffic.

“Uncle Basil, what are we going to do with Ginny? We can’t take her into the restaurant.”

“We can’t?”

I held Ginny close, pulling my sweater over her. The street light ahead was stuck on red and the drivers were honking their horns. [1024]